

# PENCRAFT

WILLIAM WATSON









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A PLEA FOR THE OLDER WAYS

BY WILLIAM WATSON

NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY

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**D**E QUINCEY, whose fame as the inventor of a very rich if sometimes over-elaborated prose style has perhaps unduly obscured his specific services to criticism, divided literature, as all its lovers are aware, into two great main classes: the literature of Knowledge and the literature of Power. This formula, besides its admirable and heroic brevity, has a largeness and sweep which commandingly strike the mind; and if at first sight it seems to want the further merit of being all-embracing, this apparent defect fades away upon nearer view. For the more delicate and exquisite

products of literary art—the feminine things in literature—such as appear superficially to have little relation to what we commonly call Power, and perhaps as little to Knowledge, are seen, on closer acquaintance, to come of the same parentage as the rest: though not the sons, they are the daughters of the house, and are no less the children of Power than are their more sinewy brothers. And so, the oftener we examine and test De Quincey's famous classification, the more shall we find it to be truly a comprehensive one, masking in simplicity its catholic inclusiveness.

For the purposes of an argument which I hope to develop a little later on, I propose here to set up a formula of my own—a formula, I must apologetically admit, as dry and unromantic in its terms as De Quincey's formula is noble and imposing. If, however, the



reader can be induced to overcome his very natural repugnance to its uncaptivating aspect, he will, I think, find in it the homely virtue of practical utility. I propose, then, to divide literature into three kinds or orders, and to call them the cantative, the scriptive, and the loquitive. I am conscious that these are far from being words of witchery, but they are the best that I can find or make, and I will ask the reader not to be deterred by their forbidding appearance from going any further along the road where I invite his company.

Let me say at once that by the first of my three orders of literature, the cantative order, I do not in the least mean *poetry* as a whole. I mean the literature which, whether metrical or unmetrical, whether submissive to any law of formal rhythm or not, is felt to be, in its nature and essence, the direct

outcome of such emotions or states of mind as are quite unrelated to what I have chosen to call pencraft, quite unrelated to the pen, and capable of uttering themselves through but one medium, the medium of quite obviously and literally chanted words. The examples which most readily occur to the mind are in the Bible, and are thus, for English readers, in prose, whatever their original form. I allude to such masterpieces of pure cantation as David's elegy on Saul and Jonathan, or as the terrific battle-pæan of Deborah and Barak, with its savage repetitions and antiphonal effects, presenting a close analogy to some of the immemorial conventions of Music itself. As to modern examples, I know of few, but am inclined to think that a little—a very little—of the finest lyrical verse of Shelley comes singularly near to falling within my defi-



nition, and in virtue of so doing will probably survive when some of his most ambitious performances, which in spite of many splendours seem to miss fire as poems or as dramas, shall be little better than forgotten. The extreme rarity of the quality I have sought to indicate may be illustrated by the fact that in the entire work of Shelley's contemporary, Keats, I am not sure that I find a single trace of it. I do not say this with the object of disparaging Keats. Indeed, were I to judge the latter temperamentally by my own idiosyncrasy—a process against which any one claiming to be a critic ought to be constantly and most vigilantly on his guard—I should be disposed to pronounce him a greater poet than his more ethereal survivor and elegist. I merely emphasise a difference; I do not suggest an inferiority; and the nature of the difference

may be best exemplified by his best work—by a sonnet like that on Chapman's Homer, or by that stanza of 'the *Ode to a Nightingale* which, from its first line to its last, touches the uttermost limit and reach of Keats's entrancing genius:

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal  
bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was  
heard

In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a  
path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick  
for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
The same that oft-times hath

Charmed magic casements, opening on  
the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands for-  
lorn."



That is bewitching, ravishing. To me it seems unsurpassable. But it is not chanted words: it is supremely beautiful writing.

Therefore this wonderful and often quoted passage—and, indeed, so far as I am able to see, all its author's poems, without an exception—range themselves within what, without in the least suggesting grades of excellence, I take leave to classify as the second of my three kinds or orders of literature, the scriptive order: that is to say, the essentially *written*, as distinguished from that not necessarily greater but perhaps more elemental thing, the essentially *chanterd* word. Within this scriptive order the vast mass of fine literature, whether in prose or verse, is in fact embraced; but it is scarcely necessary to observe that there are some writers whose works belong to it more absolutely, through

and through, body and soul, than do the works of certain others. Such a writer, I think, is Landor, from whom I will permit myself the luxury of quoting the following sentence on Dante: "He had that splenetic temper which seems to grudge brightness to the flames of Hell; to delight in deepening its gloom, in multiplying its miseries, in accumulating weight upon oppression, and building labyrinths about perplexity." That is a lordly, a magnificent sentence, and it is very fine criticism to boot. But though it is actually supposed to be uttered orally by one of the speakers in his *Pentameron* its tones are palpably such as never yet proceeded from the living human mouth; its cadences, its modulations, are altogether those of the pen; it cannot be thought of apart from the pen; it is a little miracle of pencraft. Notwithstanding

that so much of his work is outwardly cast in conversational mould, I take Landor to be in essence a rather extreme development of the strictly scriptive order of literature—an author who, alike in his prose and his often noble verse, never for a moment goes anywhere near to touching the confines of that order, where it reaches out towards what I have called the cantative on one side and the loquitive on the other. But as a matter of fact that order comprehends, as we have noted, the major part of literature proper, and thus includes the work of writers as far asunder as Hooker from Goldsmith, as Bolingbroke from Bunyan, or as the creator of Dugald Dalgetty from the creator of Job.

I pass now to my third, or what I have proposed to call the loquitive, order of literature. The first and most transcendental of our three orders has



its foundation, as we have seen, in primitive and deep-seated human emotions and impulses, as obscure in their origin as the impulse of laughter or the impulse by which in earlier ages men rent their garments during extreme and violent grief. The second order, which I have termed the scriptive, rests largely on a convention, the great convention of the pen, in obedience to which the human mind utters itself with a certain traditional formality, a degree of state and ceremony not used in conversation. The third or loquitive order has necessarily neither the mysterious sanctity of the first nor the less remote and more approachable dignity of the second, but in form and substance is little if at all distinguishable from conversational speech. It is essentially talk, arrested and perhaps methodised; at its best, the talk of genius; talk which has more

or less purged itself of what is casual and fugacious, and has submitted to direction, co-ordination, and discipline. The classical example of this order of literature is perhaps Montaigne, but among authors of our own time and country one might point to the late Andrew Lang as a writer who was almost always interesting and not seldom illuminating, but whose tone and manner, deliberately and by choice, are the tone and manner of talk.

Here let me say that I assign no rigid and exact boundaries to any of my three orders of literature. Their frontiers are here and there debatable, as where pure cantation relaxes and sinks into a kind of recitative. Much of *Paradise Lost* seems to me a kind of recitative. And at the other end of the scale—the loquitive end—talk may lapse or decline—I will not say degenerate—into prattle. Pepys is a

prattler, even if an immortal one. But allowing for some fluidity in their confines I think that my three orders not only cover all literature, whether in verse or prose, but afford such a basis for at least the approximate delimitation of its chief imperial provinces as may be found modestly serviceable to those engaged in that task.

Now the two extremes, the pure cantative at one end, and the pure loquitive at the other, have this in common, that they are both of them equally removed from what is strictly and properly pencraft; they are both of them, in their essence, outside the great tradition and convention of the pen. It is the immense middle region that is absolutely literature; neither a sublimely abnormal, half preternatural phenomenon nor a transfiguration of everyday chit-chat, but absolutely literature. And this immense



middle region has a distinctive language of its own, a language which is neither the language of gods nor of *gamins*, but just the language of literature. And when I observe the tendency, nowhere so marked, I might say so rampant, as among a section of the *litterati* themselves, to treat the language of literature as something to be apologised for, with secret blushes, something to be cravenly disowned in public by those who perhaps have been nourished upon it from their youth up in private, something which, as compared with the language of real life, is a shadowy and spectral counterfeit or substitute, born of the dead air which is supposed to stagnate behind never-opened study windows; when I read, as I lately read in the advertisement of an American publisher, of "that now discredited word *literary*," and of how this and that author's

books are well-springs of delight, because they are entirely untainted by anything which "that now discredited word *literary*" is held to connote; when I see these things—and who that ever looks at the literary columns of a newspaper or turns the pages of a magazine can escape seeing them?—I am tempted to ask: What is this vehemently repudiated literary language, this lifeless bloodless thing, this child of dust and ashes, but the best and most perfected fashion of human speech?—a form and mode of human speech at once amplified in range and simplified in operation by being delivered from all the ten thousand hampering accidents which nullify and paralyse the language of real life whenever it essays to perform any of the nobler offices of expression. The language of real life, even when it attempts only the smaller things, is

usually inexact and confused and embarrassed; in presence of the greater things it either abdicates altogether or fumbles and stumbles in helpless incapacity to carry out its own ill-defined intentions. It habitually evades the greater ideas and succumbs before the greater emotions; if it attempts anything better it quickly loses its way, breaks up, and is dissipated and dispersed in a hundred blind alleys. The directness commonly claimed for it is really one of its rarest attributes; rather is its course a perpetual zigzag. In other words, the language of real life is a veil, a hindrance, an obstruction; often in effect a lying witness, even when it honestly sets out to tell the truth. To the deliberate and ordered language of literature it is a stammer; it is not truly an utterance at all, but a series of defeats or retreats in the vain effort



towards utterance. The clarified and sifted language of literature, on the other hand, is relatively achievement as compared with failure; it does what the language of real life would do if it could. It speaks where the other mumbles; it is articulate where the other cannot out with its thoughts; it delivers the message which the other has dropped by the way. The habit of disparaging and belittling this pre-eminently efficient manner of speech is perhaps foolish enough in any one, but sits with a peculiarly ill grace upon those whose only prowess in assaulting the fort has been acquired whilst belonging to its garrison.

Together with this curious tendency among living penmen to help dethrone the pen—a tendency which is simply a fouling of their own nest and a quite needless surrender to the Philistines—there has grown up an allied habit of

treating the beautiful and noble technique of literary art as though it were something idle and trifling, and even illustrious writers have lent countenance to this practice. A few years ago there was given to the world a private letter of George Meredith's in which he took occasion to speak sneeringly of Tennyson as being "still occupied with his vowel-endings." Now Mr. Meredith had a mind of extraordinary richness and vitality, which I would not for the world be suspected of underrating, but to sneer at a master of blank verse for being "still occupied with his vowel-endings" is just as foolish as it would be to sneer at an architect for being "still occupied with his volutes and cornices." If an architect proceeded on the assumption that he had a soul above volutes and cornices the result would be bad architecture; if a verse-maker

looked down with disdain upon all such considerations as those connected with vowel-endings the result would be, as unhappily it often is, bad verse. Poetry is just as much an art and craft as architecture, and though in every art the major effects are no doubt obtained by breadth and sweep of design and conception, there are also the humbler ancillary details, which make their indispensable, if often undetected and, as one may say, insidious contribution to the general end; and the complete master is he who can hold many threads together, and who has at once an ear for the divine promptings and a hand for half-mechanic toil. Had Meredith's sneer been on the lips of a lesser man I should have suspected affectation, the common affectation of superiority to patient laboriousness; but he was too sincere for affectation, and I take it that this was simply an instance



of the constitutionally imperfect sympathy felt by a potent and abounding mind for aims and methods remote from its own.

Literary affectation, however, is a fact, probably as old as the care for vowel-endings—with which, by the way, Tennyson was not preoccupied to the exclusion of other matters, such as the pathos of religious doubt, and the permanence of God amid the transience of creeds. And truly the worst literary pose of all is the pose of unliterariness; the pose, far from uncommon to-day, of the man who is obviously a man of the pen, but who often seems to write in order to display his contempt for writing. There is a school of authors (flanked and supported by a school of critics) whom the innocent reader pictures as living in an atmosphere of almost violent reality. Their books are of the kind

which are praised for being little short of brutally "alive"; their pages positively exhale virility, and they themselves, in the intervals of literary production, appear to be engaged in pastimes beside which the tiger-hunt is an enervating and emasculating form of indulgence; but experience has taught me that these are precisely the persons whom one can count upon meeting at every literary "At Home" in London, where, as a rule, they are easily recognisable by their stooping shoulders, undeveloped chests, and atrabilious complexions.

In regard to all the greater arts—those which together constitute literature by no means excepted—it is little more than a platitude to say that they cannot be worthily pursued without some degree of honourable pride, the pride of a dutiful servant in serving a noble mistress. The servant may be

as apologetic as he chooses concerning the imperfections of his service, but to be apologetic concerning his mistress herself does not become him. It is out of place, and among artists other than literary I cannot remember ever to have observed it. I have never heard among painters and sculptors such a phrase as "that now discredited word *artistic*," any more than I have ever heard among savants such a phrase as "that now discredited word *scientific*." It is among the *litterati* alone that we meet with a kind of shamefaced disloyalty towards her whom they have the glory to serve. Some of them seem to be always saying sadly: "Yes, we feel that we are only literary persons, and that this is a far smaller thing than to be men and women." Perhaps it is; perhaps art itself is a smaller thing than life. The minaret is smaller than the mosque, the peak is less than

the mountain, but they do nevertheless beautifully crown the whole, which without these summits would not be what it is. I will permit myself the liberty of saying here that I have noticed in the published correspondence and other writings of great modern musicians a frankness and engaging wholeheartedness in discussing their own craft and vocation, such as seemed to me to be altogether commendable, and to contrast favourably with the hesitance, the timorousness, the disposition to make needless concessions and capitulations to the uncultivated indifferentist, which I so often find among those of my own calling and profession. I have also noticed in the current criticism of Painting an ample and generous recognition of the importance of its manipulative side, a living interest in the business and technique of the art,



and I am disposed to think that the criticism of poetry would lose nothing in vision and gain much in sure-footedness by a larger infusion of the same spirit. It might even operate as a useful corrective to the tendency, observable more and more in the criticism of poetry, to enthrone the amateur, the half-artist half-pretender who seems never to have submitted himself to the salutary tedium of apprenticeship, who has never mastered, and in some cases insolently disdains to master, his medium, his vehicle of expression. I neither exaggerate nor speak at random when I say that there are living critics of English poetry—and critics whose gifts and powers I respect as sincerely as I deplore the manner of their exercise—who positively and openly resent sound workmanship and high finish, as if these things not only argued the

existence of "some hidden want," some hollowness which they were designed to cover, but as if they were actually an offence in themselves, or as if it were a poet's unquestioned duty to emulate those painters who by preference leave all their brushmarks on the canvas. This spirit, reappearing from time to time in our criticism, may in some measure help to explain what is psychologically a very interesting phenomenon—the periodic outbreak in our literature of something disordered and disorderly, as if in response to a secret weariness of any force that is chastened or beauty that is law-abiding; but both the spirit and the phenomenon seem to suggest that in spite of all our vitality and potency we are yet in our æsthetic instincts a barbaric people as compared with the race that fixed the paramount types of form and comeliness. Cer-

tainly the very marked prevalence and influence at the present day of the spirit to which I allude may well warrant the reflection that while the criticism of English poetry has, during recent years, been carried on with admirable sincerity and unwaning brilliance, the maintenance of these qualities at so high a pitch of power has nevertheless coincided, in many quarters, with a visibly loosening hold upon certain laws and principles lying at the root of all sound æsthetic judgment; laws and principles perhaps coy to any attempt at rigid formulation, yet in their essentials broadly deducible from tradition and from the immemorial practice of the greater poets; laws and principles in defiance of which, no matter how gifted or how daring the defier, no noble poetry ever has been, or even can be, conceived and brought to birth.

Reverting for a moment to what I have called the pose of unliterariness, I venture to draw the attention of the curious to the ironic fact that writers who adopt it make their most successful appeal to the ultra-literary; it is a pose that fails pitifully to impress the unsophisticated million. No great writer ever demanded more insistently to be considered as the natural man addressing the natural man than did Whitman; no great writer ever had a more essentially, I had almost said narrowly, literary audience. His success was largely a capture of the coteries. In America, where one hears in private a good deal concerning his far from contemptible genius for advertisement that is not heard in England, his truly magnificent pose was fairly well recognised as a pose from the first; in this country it was scarcely an accident that the chorus of



somewhat exaggerated acclaim that greeted him in the early 'seventies ascended mainly from a group of enthusiasts who were nothing if not men of letters to their finger-tips. The boisterous and shaggy barbarian of Brooklyn had provided a novel stimulus for the jaded literary palates of the mildest-mannered of Irish professors and the most vehement of illustrious English poets.

Swinburne afterwards apostatised from Whitman, and the levity of the recantation inspires misgivings as to the deep-rootedness of the creed. With all his vagaries the poet who had reviled Horace as a sycophant, who had described one of the most insalubrious of French novels as "the Holy Writ of beauty," and had apotheosised Villon—a member of the dangerous classes with a knack of writing—was yet a lord of pencraft, and must have

known with what ease any moderately clever man who chose to do it could write page on page of dithyramb indistinguishable from *Leaves of Grass*. The excesses of Whitman-worship had disgusted him: I hazard the surmise that the later and more grotesque extravagances of the Blake cult can hardly have been much more truly to his taste. Blake, he has told us, in picturesque if somewhat contorted language, "founded at midnight" the "school" of poets which Coleridge "ratified at sundawn." The chronology is loose, and the confraternity of totally independent poets to which Coleridge belonged was in no sense a school, while I greatly doubt if any of its members would for a moment have acknowledged Blake as the founder of their fellowship; but the confident boldness of the statement, with its sonorous tone as of a pro-

clamation, is grandiose and imposing. I am, however, inclined to think that, as a founder, a somewhat more tenable claim could be advanced for Blake in another if kindred field. He is the author of a proverb or apothegm—"Damn braces, bless relaxes"—which compels admiration for its pregnant succinctness but on every other ground is as thoroughly bad, pernicious, and disintegrating in æsthetics as it is in ethics, and from which a whole school and theory of criticism may with some plausibility be alleged to have sprung. This saying is indeed the very charter of anarchy. It is as welcome as an evangel to all the incompetents and incorrigibles who hate nothing so much as authority and discipline. It is probably the most concise expression on record of a critical philosophy eminently dear to a certain callow sort of mind; the sort of mind which can

never understand that in Letters, as in conduct, strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth to eternal life; the sort of mind which can always be trusted to choose and single out for homage, among the children of Imagination, her surreptitious bastards rather than her acknowledged issue, born of her marriage with Law.

To my mind the professed lover of poetry in whose pantheon Blake has a commanding pedestal while Pope has none is a person whose education in the lyre has left off not far from where it ought to have commenced. The greatness of Blake's genius in pictorial invention stands above challenge, nor do even its most fantastic feats require vindication. In that realm he is secure: he moves undismayed among the most daunting apparitions; he is at ease alike in Satanic and celestial society; he has given solidity to his



dreams, stability to his nightmare. But when this profound seer and symbolist exchanges the art of Dürer, in which he is a compelling master, for the art of Dante, in which he is a faltering pupil—exchanges a truly inspired burin for a most unsure and infirm pen—he is like a man leaving his native country, whose laws and customs were his birthright, and venturing without passport into a land with whose very language he has but a beginner's acquaintance. Poetry is not a kingdom to be annexed in that casual way. I say poetry, for in discussing Blake I avoid, by set purpose, those impenetrable banks of prose fog lying somewhere to leeward of his Parnassus and commonly styled his Prophetic Books. My concern is not with writings of which the interest, if they have any, is of a kind bordering on the pathological, but with those

productions of a man of genius which his more rational admirers admit to contain whatever of value has come from his pen. At the head of his poetry, by general consent, I think, stands the celebrated poem on the tiger, and if it were sustained throughout at the level of its superb opening lines it would be sufficient to give him an unassailable place among the poets. Unfortunately it is not so sustained, and herein it illustrates well his besetting frailty. The wing that rises one moment flags the next; the poem that seems auspiciously born—witness that haunting little piece, *The Sunflower*,—is strangled in its cradle. In poetry, if the race is to the swift, the runner will fare badly whose swift-ness at starting is foiled in a trice by shortness of breath. This poet's wizardry can build us a fairy porch, but entering we find that the porch

is well-nigh all. Let us freely admit that here was wizardry, but let us not so debase our standards of comparison as to confuse the poor, baffled master of a single magic moment with the great enchanters who call up palaces from the void.

Blake could now and then give to a prose aphorism a terseness and tense-ness which make his resignation to a mostly ungirdled and slattern Muse the more surprising. And if we compare minutely the earlier and later versions which we possess of *The Tiger* we shall find that he was quite capable of the laborious revision of obstinate details, quite capable of toiling hard to present coherently a thought which he had at first only half articulated; but he was quite incapable of so reviving the original generative mood out of which a whole poem arose as to reconceive *ab ovo*

its misgrown or arrested parts and develop them afresh on the lines of organic and normal evolution. Such an incapacity betokens some deep inward stultification and disablement, not apt to afflict even the lesser masters of song, who are masters largely in virtue of their power to control in some degree the tidal movements of their own minds, and to induce by volition what at first came to them independently of their will. In the first version of *The Tiger* there are positive lesions of sense, raw and gaping wounds, and in the later version these are treated with a sort of surgery which seems curiously to combine rashness and hesitance, almost countenancing the surmise that some friend or critic with a more logical grasp of language than his own had incited him to emendations which heal the lacerated tissue but leave most un-



professional traces of suture. However this may have been, the conscientious yet hopeless clumsiness of the operation is very manifest, and is of a nature which argues some more special disability than is involved in the mere imperfect equipoise of the intellectual and the purely poetic faculties.

I do not deny, for it is undeniable, that in the course of transit from a sort of glorified nursery babble to something which for the most part really seems less infantile than senile, less reminiscent of the lispings of childhood than prelusive of the drivel of dotage, he struck a few vibrating and penetrating chords. Justice obviously demands that one should concede no less, and with that concession I am of opinion that justice is satisfied. But these few, these very few vibrating and penetrating chords, mostly evoked with considerable uncertainty of hand,

are not sufficient title-deed to such an estate in fame as that of which he has latterly held the enfeoffment. It is certainly no small thing, at any time, to write verse of an extreme and nude simplicity without incurring the suspicion that its artlessness was premeditated and factitious, and to do this was trebly an achievement at a time when the reigning mode was rather to live a life of poetic diction and be finally rapt from earth in a blaze of antithesis. I recognise that in relation to an epoch such verse had no little significance; the significance of sedition uttered with impunity under a despot's windows: but that is the significance of a symptom chiefly, like the significance of Strawberry Hill in relation to the Gothic Revival. It is not relative but absolute values which ultimately count. A rose-grower does not send to a rose-show a poor starved

imperfect rose, a pathetic piece of arrested development, and expect it to carry off the prizes because it was grown in an unfavourable soil and climate and is a horticultural triumph relatively to those adverse conditions. The rose is judged with sole regard to its absolutely accomplished beauty as a rose; on no other ground, by no other standard, is its rank in the rose-world determined. On the like grounds, by the like criteria, must a poet's final place be fixed; and tried by these tests, which seem to me the eternal ones, I find Blake wanting, while Pope emerges from the ordeal, not indeed a poet of very deep tones or very wide gamut, but an almost miraculous performer upon a rigorously limited instrument, which obeys him with infallible precision, and seems delighted to be his slave.

Things hidden from the wise, I shall

doubtless be reminded, are revealed unto babes; and perhaps I shall be bidden to learn that one who is a babe in the craft and lore of the pen may yet have deeper secrets to impart than were known to its sagest legislators, from him of Stagyra onward. It is true that the capable and successful, the easy masters of life, are the very last persons to have a private path to the Spheres, to have visited the dark side of the moon, or overheard the gossip of the galaxy. Great indeed is a "profound simplicity of intellect," great can be the power of the childlike mind, yet I do not know that I am prepared to live in the nursery for the distant and doubtful chance that some apocalypse may there be vouchsafed which is denied to the study and the cloister, the workshop and the fields. The adult brain craves the society of adult brains and the harvest of



adult experience. The childlike mind did not write *Faust* or *Hamlet*, nor do the fashioners of such masterpieces lay very childlike hands on their themes or material. Humility and diffidence, and even a too nice scrupulousness, are rarely prominent among their virtues. Covetable estates they seize and occupy, with scant regard to the former settlers, who had thought their own tenure a freehold. They do not appeal to us by any pathos of half-achievement. There is no shadow of frustration upon them. Their annals are a story of overcoming.

In every art but literature, and in every department of literature but poetry, it is commonly taken for granted that before the artist sets out to interpret for us the enigma of the universe he should have solved the humbler problem of how to use in a workmanlike way the tools he works

with. In poetry alone is a fumbling inefficiency and undexterity in the handling of the tools not only permitted but even in some circles applauded, not only applauded but even viewed as presumptive evidence of the more spiritual gifts, if not as conferring an actual warrant or certificate of such endowments. In a shoemaker the habit of making shoes reasonably well is not thought a more insuperable bar to profound or impassioned vision than is the practice of making them villainously ill; but in a verse-maker the tendency to make verses which conform to accepted standards of shapeliness would appear to be regarded by many as a fundamental disqualification for any luminous insight into life or nature, while such insight is looked upon as something to be quite naturally predicated of one whose work defies all metrical morphology and even

refuses to submit to the indignity of scansion.

This last refusal is by some considered especially heroic: witness the reception accorded by critics of repute to the freaks of poets who in recent years have maltreated so ruthlessly that noble and distinctively English possession, our so-called blank verse—a measure which, as a national heirloom, might have been thought to have a sacredness which would have saved it from violence, not to say defloration, at their hands. All such assaults upon it are doomed to fail, but certain less extreme aggressions have become so general that I propose here to offer a few observations on that misconception of the nature and capabilities of our blank verse which they reveal.

This measure, which seems to me a more perfect vehicle of thought and

feeling than even the great metre of antiquity—avoiding as it does both the canter of a too dactylic hexameter and the laggard pace of a too spondaic one—is a form of verse which sanctions and even invites a large amount of liberty within the scope of its far from inelastic laws, but there are some kinds of license which are foreign to its whole tradition. One of them is the crowding of huddled supernumerary syllables into a line—a practice of late much favoured amongst us. In Italian, with its wealth of terminal vowels which minimise friction between words, and facilitate their gliding interflow, poetry attains by easy and natural processes the richly undulatory movement of such a line as:

*Amor, che a nullo amato amar perdona,*<sup>1</sup>

and thousands of like mould. Here, it will be observed, the billowiness

<sup>1</sup> *Inferno*, V, 103.



of the rhythm rests entirely on confluences of terminal and initial vowels, as it does also in the penultimate foot of this line of Milton:

*"Damasco or Marocco or Trebisond."*

But such confluences can seldom happen in English: instead of them we have *collisions* of consonants; and the attempt made by several of our living poets to reproduce the Italian billowiness without the help of the Italian fluidity results for the most part in a glut of hard, clotted, insoluble sounds. Our blank verse cannot digest them; it is convulsed in the effort to vomit them out. The very spirit of this metre is strangely misunderstood by those critics who imagine it capable of indefinite evolution and progress, and are constantly demanding from it these things. They seem to take decomposition for progress, which certainly

in a sense it is—in the sense that it marks a further stage of being; but surely that particular stage is one to be postponed as long as possible, not artificially and prematurely induced. Certain of our Georgian singers, and even one or two poets whose roots go down into late-Victorian antiquity, are so haunted by a dread of smoothness that they have very nearly erected cacophony into a cult. They pursue it as an end in itself laudable: *in hoc malum a quibusdam etiam laboratur*. They appear to overlook the fact that the dissonance which may be of value as an exception loses all such value when it becomes the rule; and that it is one thing to vary the monotony of harmony by an occasional discord, and quite another thing to make discord itself so monotonous that the unforeseen intrusion of harmony shall come as a disturbance and a shock. They

even forget that it is not the open and flagrant departures from regularity which delight the ear, but the scarcely remarked ones, as in a line like:

“Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth.”

I have not the temerity to fling myself against the general opinion of critics concerning Milton's deviations from normal rhythm, but I will allow myself to say this, that in my judgment they are far the most felicitous when palpably dictated by some specific occasion or object and not by the supposed general necessity of relieving a too uniform steadiness of gait and carriage. Thus when he writes of

“Leviathan, which God of all his works  
Created hugest that swim the ocean stream,”

the inflation of the second line by its redundant syllable, and the sense of impeded bulk and lumbering power

which the corrugated words convey,  
are signally apt and aiding. But not  
finding similar enforcement of the sense  
I discern no very special happiness in a  
metrical eccentricity like that which  
occurs in the passage where Satan

“saw

Virtue in her shape how lovely, saw, and  
    pined  
His loss.”

The loveliness of the shape of Virtue  
hardly seems the better brought home  
to us by an abnormality in the shape  
of the blank verse. And on the other  
hand, to suppose that Satan's “loss”  
of virtue is here symbolised by the  
metre's loss of form “were to consider  
too curiously.” In Shakespeare, when  
Hotspur breaks out:

“My lord, I did deny no prisoners;  
But I remember, when the fight was done,  
And I was dry with rage and extreme toil,



Breathless and faint, leaning upon my  
sword,  
*There came a certain lord, neat and trimly  
dressed,*  
Fresh as a bridegroom,"

and so on, the sudden dishevelment of otherwise orderly rhythm—whether by accident or design is immaterial—seems certainly to aid the sense. He is thundering his contempt for a fop's unseasonable neatness, and the rumpled line affects us as a flout at neatness in general. But in Milton I do not feel that anything is gained by erratic metricism when, during a passage of divine majesty and pathos, the reader suddenly comes upon that strangely wayward line:

"And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old."

I do not forget that Milton was an accomplished musician, and that it is one of the devices of musicians to

torture us with a discord in order that they may assuage us with its resolution; and this may have been what Milton here intended. But it is surely unfortunate to have so framed the line that the reader stops to wonder whether the poet really dictated it in its present form or thus:

“And Phineus and Tiresias, prophets old,”

which would have spared our ears any disciplinary exercise. However that may have been, Milton, in the matter of eccentric rhythms, did not sow with the sack, like those amongst us who write as if metrical laws were made solely to be broken, and who break them till their pages are littered with the shards. And though I count him king of poets I am disposed to think that those who are not themselves of the blood royal might perhaps with greater safety follow the less

august example of Gray; a poet oddly characterised by a famous critic of the last century as one who "never spoke out," but in whom the feature which the famous critic seems to have mistaken for a hampering reticence appears to me a superb faculty of self-governance, one of the happiest of all gifts; a poet who could be *felicissime audax* at the right time and place, and whose few violations of strict metrical canon, whilst they are among the most exquisite incidents of his art, are chiefly such by virtue of the apt and special service they render to some thought or image or fancy. A charming example is the couplet he is said to have thrown off during a walk, with a friend:

"There pipes the songthrush, and the skylark there  
Scatters his loose notes in the waste of  
air,"

the delicately "loose" versification taking its character from the thing described. But the most perfect instance of all is his picture of the Muse as haunting the Chilean forest, where

"She deigns to hear the savage youth repeat  
*In loose numbers wildly sweet*  
Their feather-cinctured chiefs and dusky  
loves."

That is indeed delectable, that is transporting! I am of course aware that the Gallios who care for none of these things will smile at my enthusiasm over what will seem to them a piece of idle artifice. They are welcome to their smile.

It will by this time have been seen, from sundry indications, that I attach great importance, greater than some eminent critics would countenance me in attaching, to qualities which by many are viewed as merely external,



as no more than auxiliary and subsidiary at the best, and at the worst as positive hindrances and trammels, a drag on the hot wheels of inspiration, a bar to the beautifully unimpeded play of the soul. I allude to qualities identical in essence with those which, when we recognise them in some material object, are best summed up in the simple comment that the thing is *well made*.

Now in art and literature there are, broadly speaking, two ways in which this excellent virtue of being well made reveals and reports itself—a lower and a higher concurrently. The chair I am sitting in is a remarkably well made chair. Its tenons and mortises fit with precision, and though about a century and a half old it continues to fulfil without reproach all the strictly prosaic ends of a chair. Its merits in that respect are indeed the merits of simple,

honest, straightforward prose. But it has others. It was conceived, as one may say, in the brain of a master of noble chaircraft, one Chippendale to wit: hence it has a grace and harmony of flowing lines, a suavity of insinuating curves, which minister to the chaste lust of the eye in a subtle, unaccountable manner, and which, if they be not the poetry of the chair, are at least its rhetoric—a choice and felicitous rhetoric. And here I should greatly like to pause, and, if it be possible, rescue this word *rhetoric* from the evil habits into which it has latterly fallen by no innate fault of its own. This once quite honourable word is now become a term of rank abuse, a portable handy missile to be heaved at any obnoxious man of verse who has not founded himself altogether on “Mary had a little lamb,” or the “Songs of Innocence,” or other lyrism

similarly untainted with the vices of the rhetorician. The simple truth is that there is a tinsel rhetoric and there is a golden rhetoric. Our Bible is richly veined with the latter sort, and the view, now so common, that poetry and rhetoric are incompatible, or at any rate mutually antagonistic, would be hard to maintain in presence of the major prophets and the royal psalmist. The exact boundaries of rhetoric and poetry—if they have them—are by no means easy to define, but the truth seems to be that the very purest poetry of all—not necessarily the grandest—is unrhetorical. They “were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they are not divided”—that is quite unrhetorical. It is an unadorned statement of things too beautiful to need adornment, and is no doubt very pure poetry. But “The dayspring from on high hath visited

us" partakes distinctly of rhetoric, not even escaping a faint touch of the vertuose in the word *visited*, used here in a very Shakespearian way.<sup>1</sup> Yet he would be a bold man who should deny that it is exalted poetry. "He led captivity captive" is rhetoric as out-and-out as it could possibly be, but is also poetry of a majestic and moving character. Sometimes we meet with an unadorned statement clinched by a rhetorical one. "He was wounded for our transgressions" is an unadorned statement; but the words almost instantly following it—"and with his stripes we are healed"—whether poetry or not, are indubitably rhetoric, and are memorable and very enforcing. These examples present themselves unsought and might be

<sup>1</sup> Compare "the ruddy drops That visit this sad heart," "And there is nothing left remarkable Beneath the visiting moon," etc.



multiplied without end, but to do so is needless. It is plain that the sublimest Hebrew seers, in their equipment and accoutring, drew freely and without shame upon the armoury of literary art and artifice, taking care that the sword of the spirit, besides being keen, should be wrought beautifully, and its hilt encrusted with gems.

To come down from Zion to less awesome places,—the analogy of the Chippendale chair, the more we consider it, is the better seen to be valid and assisting. The two processes which have gone to the making of the chair—that which aimed at beauty and that which aimed at utility—may seem at first sight to have been collateral, parallel, and therefore separate: they have really been so intimately concerted as to be in effect one and indivisible. And in like manner interwound, or, let us say, blissfully inter-

clasped, are the glory of phrase and the bare logical framework of sense and meaning in some noble passage of Shakespeare, except that a vastly more powerful agent of fusion has here been at work. Tennyson speaks of a tempest

“In which the bounds of earth and heaven  
were lost.”

If we compare logical sense and meaning to earth, and Shakespearian glory of phrase to heaven, it is just in this way that *their* bounds also are seen to have been lost when an electric storm of emotion has obliterated them. But the things themselves are more than interwoven; they are consubstantial and connative, and while we cannot say of the logic that it was “created first,” like Adam in Paradise, much less can we say of the glory that it was

“after made,  
Occasionally,”

as Milton, with a little uncourtliness, affirms of Adam's helpmeet. And here the word *made* brings us back, opportunely enough, to the point whence we started—the point where I spoke of those qualities in a piece of literature which, when we see them in some material object, we are in the habit of summing up by saying that the thing has been *well made*.

*Venice Preserved* is a well-made play, but is nevertheless, as literature, if not dead, at least long withered from robust life. *Julius Cæsar* is an ill-made play, but nevertheless, as literature, is all astir with vitality. Still it is probable that if the Shakespearian work, besides being lusty with natural sap, had been as well made as the Otwegian, it would now rank among

its creator's masterpieces, which a radical unsoundness of dramatic structure forbids it to do. Thus has violated Form avenged herself; and literature is strewn with the memorials of her vindictiveness. Consider the case of Donne. His best poems abound in meat and marrow. He had a temper as remarkable for emotional intensity as for intellectual subtlety. Until disease—perhaps the Nemesis of his torrid youth—had wasted his body he seems to have been in a very high degree what Tennyson said that John Richard Green was—"a vivid man." His thick, choked utterance cannot disguise the force and ardency of his nature. At their smokiest and sootiest his suffocated fires crackle and explode into sudden surprising flame. But scarcely anything had the luck to come shapen aright out of that forge. His uncouthness really passes tolera-



tion, and, with a strange irony, has condemned this man, so "vivid" in his life, to the driest and dustiest kind of embalmment—he is read by the literary *student* only! Professor Grierson, who not long ago rendered Donne the invaluable service of editing his poems with an enthusiasm only equalled by his erudition and acumen, has explored every nook of this poet's rugged and volcanic landscape, and has applied to some of its tangled thickets an ingenious system of metrical guide-posts, so that the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein. They enable us to wrestle more successfully with a versification which in its supreme crabbedness must be the envy of one or two living practitioners; but even with these amenities of travel the region will never attract any but the hardier kind of tourist.

Such is the doom that overtakes whatever is flagrantly ill made. But there are literary products which are not so much ill made as *undermade*; and quite as truly there are others of which the fatal vice is that they are *overmade*. Some of the poetry of Rossetti has manifestly this vice; he seems to be *brandishing* before us the rich effects of sound and colour which he can undoubtedly obtain from words. The poetry of Byron, on the other hand, suffers too often from the opposite fault; with all its abundant force and flow and glow it is not *made enough*, it is undermade. And nearly all mediocre poetry, of the kind which not seldom has a certain lease of popularity and is for a time carelessly confused with finer work, has the same defect. The metrical writings of Robert Buchanan illustrate this. He was a man of pith and power, whose

verse well reflects his energy and fecundity of mind; but the thing is undermade. The work of nearly all the American poets of Lowell's generation suffers in the same way. Bryant is a good example. His poetry has not had enough *milling*. Even of Lowell himself this is usually true. Most of his poems would gain by being kneaded down to about one-fourth of their present dimensions, their innutritive and merely aqueous constituents getting pressed out in the process, and only a quintessential residuum surviving this beneficent ruthlessness. Edgar Poe, on the contrary, is perhaps the great example of how a man of genius can sometimes ruin his work by overmaking it; his *Ulalume* is in that respect a warning to all time. It is worth noting that America had, at about the same period, another poet, now forgotten—

Chivers—of whom I have been told that Swinburne was once in the habit, privately, of likening his verse to that of the late Francis Thompson (with obvious injustice to the latter) and whose diction was a very riot and orgy of the overmaker's really unartful art. But without multiplying instances of the two extremes—the overmade and the undermade—one may say that between them, and with a reasonable prospect of outliving both, there remains the work that stands the ancient and not yet obsolete tests applied to all products of human effort and human intelligence, the work that is *made enough* and not more than enough, neither deformed by excessive ver-tuosity like some of Rossetti's poems, nor flung out too palpably in the unsmelted ore stage, like some of Byron's. It is work which owes its æsthetic excellence in great measure



to what I must call a moral root and basis—the wholly honourable passion of the workman for levying upon his own spirit the utmost toil it can bear without impoverishment, and for doing as well as nature and circumstance permit him whatsoever thing he strives to do at all.

To me, the mere masterly fashioning, by another labourer, of any piece of pencraft, be it what it may, is something which in itself provides a captivating and exciting spectacle; so much so that in early manhood, though not greatly given to the relaxation afforded by fiction, I read with avidity the works of a novelist—Wilkie Collins—whose mind soared to no great heights and whose characters themselves had no very deep fascination for me, but whose astonishing adroitness and legerdemain, whose Arachnean skill as a weaver of intricate

mysteries, whose engineering feats, whose perfect knowledge of what it was that he sought to compass, and whose equally perfect ability to compass it, were a source of unfailing delight and wonder. Now it would be idle to expect that this special interest, aroused in one kind of literary worker by the technique and apparatus of another, should be intimately shared by the average intelligent reader, who neither aspires nor condescends to be a literary worker at all. In such matters it obviously behoves the writer of this essay to recognise that his own habit and posture of mind are largely professional; perhaps not free from the narrowness which professionalism is often alleged to engender: and he begs leave to speak quite frankly as one who, without making any merit of it, is conscious of having had from earliest youth a much more than

ordinary susceptibility to literary influences and impressions; as one who, for example, can remember to this day not only the persons and incidents, but even much of the language, of Bunyan's great allegorical romance, which he read through at the age of six, for the pure delight of it, and has never looked at since. But while making due avowal of professionalism, and disclaiming any tendency to demand of others the like attitude of mind, he wishes nevertheless to affirm his belief that the average intelligent reader, when suffered to find his own natural polarity in matters of taste, has a far keener sense and a far livelier enjoyment of the qualities of workmanlike form and facture in literary products than it is usual to attribute to him. It can scarcely be an accident that for some three generations, if not precisely at the present time, the most popular

poem in our language was the incomparable *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*; a poem in which genius co-operated with inerrant taste, with profound culture, with infinite laboriousness, and with tenderest human sympathy, to produce a miracle of faultless craftsmanship, and in which art achieved that proverbial last perfection, its own invisibility.

But this natural polarity is the very last thing which criticism permits the plain man to find or rest in. For criticism, to maintain itself in power, is under strong temptation to consort with ideas, and lean on principles, which in its heart of hearts it knows to be putrid with fallacy, but which far surpass truths in the opportunities they afford it for impressive self-display; and such ideas and principles are necessarily of a kind most disturbing to the plain man's faith, which

it is their very business and mission to unsettle. In the realm over which criticism presides—and this applies especially to the criticism of poetry—the reins of government sometimes fall into the hands of a camarilla; and though such is not the case at the present time—though what we now see is rather a loosely administered State in which various groups and parties, less clearly demarcated than fluid and fluctuant of outline, hold each other in comparative equilibrium—it is none the less true that these groups and parties have the common interest of a caste or order in allowing great affairs to be transacted over the heads of the multitude: they have all united, actively or tacitly, in assisting the passage of legislation—sometimes revolutionary legislation—which no parliament of critics in any other age would have sanctioned or even seri-



ously discussed; they have all accepted as articles of faith what no general assembly of their predecessors would have consented, or even come within sight of consenting, to embody in their creed.

They have been most hospitable to heresies; they have not only received them in their houses, they have gone out to their gates to welcome with embraces these sometimes treacherous guests. I have specially in my mind at this moment the doctrine which, having regard to its far-reaching and permeative effects, I am disposed to call the great modern heresy in criticism; the doctrine which perhaps finds its ablest, most plausible, and most seductive expression in Browning's poem of *Andrea del Sarto*.

In this remarkable and fascinating poem its author, using a poet's liberty and endowing "Andrew the Tailor's

Son" with perhaps a loftier refinement and delicacy of mental constitution than the known facts of his career have altogether prepared us for, makes of him the mouthpiece of a philosophy which in its immediate reference is concerned solely with Painting, but was doubtless meant by Browning to have a very catholic application to the major arts. It is a philosophy which has not succeeded in imbuing to any great extent the criticism of either Painting, Sculpture, or Architecture: perhaps their openly ocular appeal, and the tangible, prehensible nature of their means and paraphernalia, tend to create an atmosphere unfavourable to the evasions and subterfuges on which it relies; but it colours deeply the prevalent æsthetics of poetry; there, the reigning theories are of its house and

kindred: and for these reasons I shall take the liberty to give it respectful but somewhat scrutinising attention.

Addressing his wife, Lucrezia, the painter through whom Browning has chosen to utter his own ideas points to a work of Raphael's, and descants with emotion on the fervour and enthusiasm with which that master, working under the applauding eyes of rules and pontiffs, has evidently painted it:

“Reaching, that heaven might so replenish  
him,  
Above and through his art—for it gives  
way;  
That arm is wrongly put—and there  
again—  
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,  
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,  
He means right—that, a child may under-  
stand;  
Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:

But all the play, the insight, and the stretch—

Out of me, out of me!"

So far, all is clear, and cogent enough in the main, Andrea but testifying to the might and glory of such genius as imperiously sweeps the petty fault-finder off his feet, the genius to which full-blooded transgressions are permitted, as libertinism is winked at in kings. But unhappily he goes much further. In another passage, after affirming with perfect truth:

"I do what many dream of all their lives,  
—Dream? strive to do, and agonise to do,  
And fail in doing,"—

after telling Lucrezia that he "could count twenty such," in Florence alone, who strive, and strive, and with all their striving achieve less—"so much less!"—than he can compass almost without effort, he continues:

“Well, less is more, Lucrezia; I am judged.  
There burns a truer light of God in them,  
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-  
up brain,  
Heart, or whate’er else, than goes on to  
prompt  
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman’s hand  
of mine.  
Their work drops groundward, but them-  
selves, I know,  
Reach many a time a heaven that’s shut to  
me,  
Enter and take their place there sure  
enough,  
Though they come back and cannot tell the  
world.”

The expression here is lucid enough;  
the thought is hopelessly confused.  
For if these men’s work is of non-effect,  
if it “drops groundward,” as he says,  
while they themselves soar into heaven,  
their celestial adventures, though  
doubtless for themselves a most in-



teresting experience, can have been of singularly little value to others, or to their own work, since the latter admittedly preserves no reflection of what they have been privileged to see: they "come back and cannot tell the world." It may be that "there burns a truer light of God in them" than in the "Faultless Painter" whom Browning has made their apologist, but to us the light is worthless if it be promptly snuffed out the moment they attempt to illumine with it their handiwork—the only bridge, and a tottering one, by which their minds can ever communicate with ours. And a little wayward, is it not, on our Andrea's part, to treat with contumely, in himself, the limitations which have not barred him from producing works of noble beauty, while treating with reverence, in others, the limitations which on his own showing have alto-

gether stultified, sterilised, and doomed to a miserable impotence, the souls afflicted with them? Nay, what service is rendered to art itself by encouraging its poor ineffectuals, lame and tongue-tied from the womb, to cherish frustration as a gift, and cultivate inarticulacy as a virtue? Art is not morals, in which the will may sometimes count for more than the deed, and the widow's mite may overtop the rich man's munificence; nor is it a religion, in which even faith without works may perhaps be allowed some measure of spiritual efficacy. Works impassioned by faith, irradiated by truth, but above all, consummated by power, are its only stepping-stones to salvation.

Artists of serene accomplishment but not too abounding afflatus, the Mendelssohns of their respective provinces, are seldom observed to be

palpitating with sympathy for either merits or defects of opposite character to their own, and I am not sure that it was very true to human nature to put the great "less is more" doctrine, as Browning does, into the mouth of an artist of just that order, who is made to preach it with a propagandist's fervour and zeal. But without pursuing this question one may perhaps enquire whether we are really warranted in attributing, to the great Deviser and Designer of souls, a kind of impish fondness for yoking divine power of vision with abject palsy of speech, and whether in like manner it is his wilful habit to penalise with impotence of vision the masters of utterance. And do we greatly honour the Lifegiver by imputing to him the caprice of having made feebleness of insight and poverty of spirit the natural concomitants of high executive faculty,

of that gift of moulding words or colours or tones into forms of beauty, a gift in which also one had thought there was something divine, some shadow of the Creative Puissance that fashioned the fashioner?

To narrow the ground of argument, and so perhaps bring matters to a simpler test, let us take the case of portraiture, a branch of art with well-defined aims, directed less towards creation than towards perception, statement, and, when it performs its deeper functions, psychologic interpretation and perhaps moral comment. I stood, not long ago, before the portrait of Henry VIII by Holbein which is preserved at Berkeley Castle. It looks as if painted yesterday, so sound are the pigments and so thorough the technical means which the artist employed; and in every line and tint of it an absolute unfaltering command

of the resources of his craft is legible. But this confident mastery of process and material, is it bought at the expense of deeper and more inward qualities? On the contrary, the picture is all alive with subtle character-reading and character-rendering. The man Henry Tudor is there, thoroughly perused and convincingly presented by the limner, who has limned his soul. There, in his strength, his vanity, his odious handsomeness, the King smiles for ever his detestable smile: the man who made Statecraft a go-between in his amours, and Religion a procuress; the wretch who arrayed himself, on the morrow of his first wife-murder, in a suit of unsullied white, as if the better to show forth by contrast the corruption of his soul and the hue of his bloody hands. All this and much more is there, told without any stammer, told with unimpeded



and perfectly limpid speech. For it would not seem to have been Holbein's theory of art that if "its soul is right" its body may be neglected at discretion. Rather, perhaps, would he have said: "Tend well its body, which mischance or unheed can so easily injure, lest you do to its soul the gross wrong of tethering her for life to a body ailing or deformed." When I turn from works like the productions of this master to those—not necessarily of the pencil or the brush—in which a certain turbid imaginative faculty struggles vainly towards expression, there arise in my mind the words of the son of Ahaz: "The children are come to the birth, but there is not strength to bring forth." What is it to me that they are perhaps the children of deep and ardent passion? *My* interest is in the children that are fully born, not those in the antenatal stage. Brown-

ing's æsthetics are a kind which, when I ask for offspring, mock me with a foetus. It is best to look this whole matter straight in the face. Genius that lacks the capacity of delivering itself is a contradiction in terms, for to all genius the very condition of its being is the power to bring forth what progeny soever it has conceived. Parturition is not genius, nor is gestation art.

In this essay, purporting to deal with matters to which I have given the very comprehensive name of pencraft, the reader will have noticed, perhaps not without a murmur, that the foreground of discussion is mostly occupied with poetry, and with questions and controversies having poetry for their centre. It is the art with which the public is least disinclined to admit that I have a little acquaintance; hence the space filled by it and its

adjuncts in these pages. It is likewise, if I do not err, the art in which, or in the criticism of which, the Andrean heresy to which I have just been giving some examination has obtained its firmest foothold. Elsewhere I do not see much evidence of the triumph of that great and most consolatory doctrine that the impulse and the intention are all. In the sphere of the novelist, for example, vision and passion are not yet thought to render narration superfluous; and in one branch of fiction—that of the short story—constructive and executive capacity, high manipulative skill, a glorified sleight of hand, seem especially assured of their dues: witness the admiration justly lavished upon such masterpieces as the *Rappacini's Daughter* of Hawthorne, *The Gold Bug* of Poe, or the *Wandering Willie's Tale* of Scott, upon Bulwer's fantasy *The Haunters and the*

*Haunted*, or Stevenson's excellent nightmare of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In all these, not only is the fabric extraordinarily firm, but the style, too, is eminently workmanlike—in nothing more so than in its being just an obedient instrument and servitor, not leading the way, not snatching the initiative, as the brilliant style of Meredith sometimes threatens to do. And here I may perhaps hazard a comment upon a style which seems to be gaining ground in some literary circles. I beg their pardon: they would probably scorn to be described by “that now discredited word *literary*.” I allude to a style apparently reflected from the reposeless journalese in which a bullet invariably sings, an aeroplane never forgets to drone, and a shell can be trusted at all times to scream. It is a style which in its misguided efforts to make a direct appeal to the sensorium is like a lec-

turer supplementing his oratory with a magic lantern and a gramophone. A great deal of work infected with this mannerism comes from America; a great deal more of it, I am glad to think, stays there. It is rife in all the American magazines, with one or two distinguished but perhaps not too popular exceptions. Let me say here that I am not one of those who use the word *English* as if by universal admission it necessarily connoted everything on earth that is superior. Such a use of it was observed and genially recorded several centuries ago by that secretary to a Venetian ambassador who in the account he published of "the Isle of England" wrote regarding its people: "When they wish to convey that a person is handsome they say he is like an Englishman."

I cannot plead guilty of the amiable



but slightly absurd foible of using the word *English* and its cognates in that way, but I do most assuredly hold that in the period when American literature, more touched with filial piety, more given to walk in the footprints of its fathers than it is to-day—less proudly unwilling to owe a little to the past, less scornful of the gracious sanctions of Time and consuetude—was also less furiously bent upon being at all costs indigenous; when it saw no shame in bearing some such relation to the literature of Great Britain as that of Rome bore to that of Greece; in a word, when it was more English in texture and mode than it is at present, its level of performance was incomparably higher. Since that period—the rich, mellow, humane period of Hawthorne, Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, and all their elect fraternity—the America whose an-

cestral roots were mainly, and manifestly, in these islands has given place to an America whose parent stem is fast being hidden by the multitude of its graftlings; and whether it be accident or not, the change has certainly coincided with a marked decline in literary prestige and power; so marked that America has not at the present moment a single author whose works are awaited as stirring events by a public at once intelligent and large, outside her own borders. To say this of the greatest English-speaking community in the world is to make no slight allegation, nor is it made with any zest, any gusto, in these pages. Their writer relishes far more the opportunity and duty of bearing witness to the immensely wide diffusion among all classes in the United States of a real and lively interest in the affairs of the pen, as contrasted with the lamentably

narrow area within which that interest is confined in his own country. But this widespread literary impressibility, noted with such pleasure and envy by the cultivated English visitor to the United States, is coupled with a good deal of crude and indiscriminating judgment. There is in America, for instance, a really surprising consumption of homegrown verse, but the taste it satisfies is, to state it temperately, not severe. It is verse which has often what can perhaps be best described as an uncouth sincerity. There is a residue, however, of much abler, choicer, more distinguished work, but it is apt to be less ingenuous. Its writers, like certain gifted young poets amongst ourselves, sometimes engage in the quest of singularity, and permit themselves to be diverted from objects worthier of their pursuit. Sometimes they seem to compete in breaking with

precedent and washing their hands of tradition; and the latter exercise is necessarily a violent kind of ablution, at least as roughening as it is purificatory. One remarkable fact demands record: although the American mind is now far more cosmopolitan than formerly, American poetry, to-day, as compared with that of fifty years ago, has an emphatically more provincial note. In some degree this is also true of American fiction, its living masters showing little faculty of so dealing with local truth as to mobilise it for universal conquest. Altogether, both as regards the bypaths and the broader ways, the present state of American literature proves only too well that the forces which have conspired in making the amplest, most unfettered experiment in democracy the world has ever seen are powerless to guarantee the richer fruition of the human

spirit. Their failure to do so teaches the lesson that the most victorious national life, its development wondrously abetted by nature and fortune, its resources matchless and its energies boundless, may achieve almost everything, yet lack the crowning glory and wealth of a golden tongue.

Social, political, economic influences—these can choke or sully the well-heads of noble literature; they cannot decree its gushing forth when an unknown subterranean power freezes and holds it captive. They can, however, facilitate its upward passage when it is plainly seen to be battling for egress; they can widen its channel when it has visibly emerged into the light; and during its subsequent course as a river gathering to itself many tributaries they can do much to guard it from defilement and to



ensure that it fertilises and cheers the land through which it flows.

How far these functions have remained active amongst us, or have become atrophied from disuse, may be gauged by a glance at the state of one or two of the tributaries referred to; such as the really live elements in journalism and in the vernacular of our people. There must have been a deep instinct for beauty and order in the race that could create so magnificent an instrument as the English language, but whether that instinct has kept much of its original force may well be doubted when we see the extraordinary preference for the lower levels of speech, the depraved love of the unlovely in word and phrase, nay, the unchecked and applauded search for verbal ugliness, which are among the signs of our times. To take a single instance: the sons of British

and Irish mothers, and of their ocean-parted kin, are at this moment showing themselves rich in one of the noblest human qualities, a quality for which our language has some beautiful names, such as *courage, daring, valour, bravery, dauntlessness*, besides others not quite so beautiful but still fair. And with all these words to choose from we go out of our way to bestow upon this radiant virtue of intrepidity one of the ugliest substantives our language affords—*pluck*; and we even throw its ugliness into higher relief by often attaching to it the incongruously splendid adjective *indomitable*. During recent months I have seen, in some newspapers widely read by our least literate classes, certain articles which, while giving what I do not doubt to have been truthful stories of the battlefield, were a sheer revel of almost incredibly hideous speech, the writers seeming

to rake into print every squalid colloquialism, every baseborn neologism, which the vocabulary of the uneducated can supply. There is, of course, no propriety in mating majestic words with lowly matters, but the matters here were not lowly, they were the loftiest, they were such things as heroism, and love, and sublime self-sacrifice. One cannot always live in the palaces and state apartments of language, but at least we can refuse to spend our days in searching for its vilest slums.

To leave the tributaries and return to the main stream,—what is the office which we who keep watch over literary history, whether we have a hand in its making or not, are entitled and qualified to perform at this time? It is a time which, in the domain supposed to be presided over by critical taste and judgment, may be described as an era

of partially established governance alleviated by wholly optional submission. Let none imagine, because this little book reveals scant sympathy with what is barrenly violent and erratic, that the author is a mere apostle of conformity, his gospel one of mechanical obedience to supposed statute law. Literature lives by defiance as well as by acquiescence. Its story has few episodes more romantic than those revolts, whether against some deadening, stifling *régime* or against beneficently wielded authority, those adventurous risings, which sometimes prosper and are justified, and sometimes collapse in discredit, or with the glamour of picturesque misfortune. In such mutinies the primal forces are not seldom unprisoned, the effete things are burned as chaff, and splendid rebel figures are thrown up against the flare. To apply to these insurrections a policy of

soulless repression would often be to stamp on the very seeds of life and growth and harvest. There may even be no honest course for us, in given circumstances, but to join the insurgents. What, then, is the rock of principle on which we should take our stand? It is this: the recognition of an intellectual duty and obligation on our part to see to it that our very revolutions, in their nature and purpose, are essentially movements toward order, not toward anarchy; toward that happiest freedom which rather welcomes control as a support than resents it as an interference. It is because I discern in much recent literature an opposite drift, away from that true enfranchisement, that I have attempted here the perhaps hopeless and almost certainly thankless task of doing something, however little, in the direction of counteracting such a tendency.



No doubt a lorn adventure, for a solitary swordsman to throw himself, in light armour, across the path of the prancing cohorts! Likely enough he will be trodden underfoot, and none ride up to avenge him; yet it may well happen that the need for some other and better champion of a drooping cause will hereafter be found even more urgent than now. While these words are being written the air is still full of the clash and thunder of no mere warfare of the pen. The untimely night, the *nox intempesta* of rage and slaughter, is heavy upon us; and when it shall have passed, though no man can foresee what thoughts and moods will then sway the world, at least they can hardly fail to have in them much that will be new and imperiously possessing. It is the habit of the human mind, in times of the surge and flooding-in of novel ideas,

so to magnify their momentousness, and even their novelty, as to hold cheap, if it does not passionately condemn, all solicitude for the manner of their vesture. Form becomes vanity, art is held a bauble, style an indulgence; strenuousness is all: and that way disaster lies. For another generation, coming with no very vivid concern upon a world of once red-hot but by that time sadly cooled ideas and emotions, tenets and theories, is revolted by their graceless presentment and turns from them with distaste and languor. They seem the dust of vanished collisions; the good and bad in them are confounded, and perhaps for both there will be one common doom—oblivion ruthless and ineluctable.

Save for a single brief deviation, I have, throughout this essay, confined my view to the second of those main

divisions into which, at starting, I took leave to partition literature; that is, neither the divinely cantative, which lies almost outside the critic's jurisdiction, nor the frankly loquitive, which makes appeal to a more loosely constituted court than that in which I plead, but the strictly and fundamentally scriptive, the special province, nursery, and natural home of the pen. With that sphere alone am I properly concerned; to it alone, or all but alone, is anything I have written meant to apply; and it is obviously the central and predominant region. I conclude by reaffirming in brief what it has been my essential aim to set forth more at large; firstly, that in this predominant region which is peculiarly the scene and theatre of the labours and fortunes of the pen, the arts and devices properly instrumental to those labours and fortunes ought not to be used

with a kind of slinking furtiveness, and with gesture of shamefaced apology, but as means which are dignified and even consecrated by the admitted nobility of their ends; secondly, though more incidentally, that as our literature is rich in monuments of commanding potency and mastership, reared by men who visibly rejoiced in their serene conquest of the instruments they worked with, there is something almost ludicrous, as well as radically uncritical, in such lack of the sense of proportion as permits us to be, let us say, preoccupied with Blake while ignorant of Dryden; furthermore, that although the soul of literature is without doubt a greater thing than its body, it is chiefly by the splendour and glory of its body that men are invited, beckoned, and snared into the splendour and glory of its soul; and lastly, that if, by whatever unwise treatment—

even by a too unsleeping care for its soul—we suffer its body to ail or languish, every impaired function, every degenerate organ, will open to that soul itself an avenue for decay.

Here and there in this little book the attitude ventured upon, in presence of reputations considered by many to be almost sacrosanct, has been far from prostrate; nor has it been thought needful to apologise for sincerity and independence. Without them, criticism might as well vacate its seat; for, to borrow the words of this writer's special master in poesy—words less resounding than many that we quote from him, but lifted out of their everyday mood by that wondrous voice of his, and by his supremacy in that measure which seems to catch from his mind such a nobly disciplined freedom:



“who reads  
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not  
A spirit and judgment equal or superior,  
(And what he brings, what needs he else-  
where seek?)  
Uncertain and unsettled still remains,  
Deep versed in books and shallow in him-  
self,  
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys  
And trifles for choice matters, worth a  
sponge;  
As children gathering pebbles on the  
shore.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Regained*, IV, 322-329.







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